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THE DECORATOR AND FURNISHER.

DECORATIVE ART AND FASHION.

BY JOHN WARD.



It is a common custom or fashion almost to ignore the claims of the ceiling, and in small houses it gets no more than a coat of whitewash; but whilst the surface of the ceiling is neglected, the decorator seizes the opportunity, in the plaster cornice, of stamping his individuality upon it, generally to its detriment. All raised enrichments, whether of moulding or detail ornament, owe their beauty of form to light and shade. These are usually destroyed by the average decorator when he commences his work of decoration. He is not above painting a concave or hollow yellow, or a projection blue, when the proportions of the mouldings otherwise are perfect, and in a like manner it is his delight to devote unlimited time and pains to emphasising with color any inferior enrichment with which the plaster cornice may have been embellished, and making every minute error in the composition speak for itself, instead of making the best of them by adopting a general tone. I should like to see the custom of ignoring the ceiling altered, if raised ornamentation is to be used either in the form of Lincrusta Walton or flock paper. The ceiling is a fair ground for such introduction, keeping to suitable designs of

the whole *en suite*, the same unmeaning abortion is fitted to the top of the swing-glass on the dressing table, to the top of the tile back of the washstand, and sometimes even to the back of the chairs, notwithstanding the fact that at times its being there renders the chair quite uncomfortable to any one sitting upon it.

Manufacturers do not always do these things because they themselves approve of them, but because such additions "sell the goods," the *en suite* being an indispensable condition of the fashion. One might as well build a small spire to a vicarage to show its relation to the church.

A few years ago, when the so-called revival began, it was the fashion to have plain things; unfortunately this fashion, like most fashions, was very fleeting, and now everything must be decorated, and this has to be accomplished with materially increasing the cost of production. What is the consequence? that carved panels, meaningless and hideous in design, and slovenly in workmanship, are inserted and accepted by people who pretend to be participators in this art revival, men who aspire to be critics in art work in its more exclusive branches. Yet they accept bad drawing and bad work in preference to an honest panel of plain wood.

Finally, the *motifs* for design in furniture are ever at the disposition of fickle fashion, and thus we get reproduced modern copies of good and bad examples of old work. Some of the good is rendered bad by the unsuitability to modern requirements. In the matter of design, I regret to notice at the present time there is a strong inclination to turn again to the Rococo period for *motif*—a period in the history of design bad in itself,



STRAP CEILING, DESIGNED BY G. A. AUDSLEY FOR JEFFREY & CO.

panelling, strapwork, and diaper ornaments. These, if desired, may be treated in various shades of monochrome, or even various tints; but let these various shades or tints take various sections, not individual members of mouldings and details of ornamentation.

As I do not intend to go into the minor industries beyond what I have said in a general way, I shall conclude with a few remarks upon the cabinetmaker's trade; but as this industry is not so nearly connected with the province of the architect, I shall be brief in my notice of it, notwithstanding that the subject is almost sufficient for a paper in itself. With the advent of so-called art furniture came the craze for everything to be *en suite*. To have everything in keeping is the desire of all lovers of art, but this *en suite* in its trade meaning is quite another matter. If an error is made in one article of furniture, it is *en suite* to perpetrate the same error in all others. Thus we begin by placing an unsightly pediment, one of the present *sine quâ nons* of fashion, on the wardrobe of a bedroom suit, and to make

but worse in its influence upon the more common articles of everyday use.

We frequently hear comparisons made of modern work with work of the past in which the modern work suffers. How can it be otherwise? So far as history can show us, the fashions (if I may call them such) in old work lasted for centuries, and the changes were gradual and not revolutionary. It is true we have our schools of design, which, whilst they give good art teaching to few, give a smattering of art knowledge to many. We are told a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. With this little knowledge such smatterers will pose as connoisseurs, and the littleness of the knowledge is shown by the diversity of opinion—the germ of the changes in fashion. The best art teaching for the masses is to teach them the common fitness of things, and with that knowledge they will probably be made to see that it is appropriate to leave to the artist the decorative work, and that for their own part they had better rest content with directing the practical.